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9/27/11

SB 618 - 624

**Accountability, Equity, Transparency – Testimony to Senate Education Committee, 9/27**

I am here today because the legislation being proposed is going to give away Michigan tax dollars. It will give dollars for public education to unproven entities with little or no oversight on what those dollars will be buying.

There is no question that we have to use our dollars to make public education better for each and every Michigan child, but to do that effectively we have to use the best thinking and best practices that have been proven to bring the best education forward.

My remarks today will follow three themes: Accountability, Equity and Transparency.

**Accountability** – I have for each of you an executive summary of *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: An American Agenda for Educational Reform*. I hope you will scan this powerful recap of education research before you make your final decision – you will find an analysis of how other countries caught up with and then surpassed us on student achievement. You will find that their strategies included none of the things you have in the batch of “empowerment” bills being considered. In fact, what is being considered has been tried before and has not worked:

Uncapping Charters – we already have uncapped charters for those performing at high levels. This was done last year. Now you are considering uncapping them regardless of performance. That is not going to guarantee our students a better education.

According to national, statewide and local research, there is no proof that charter schools demonstrate higher academic performance than community governed public schools – and that research comes from reputable sources like Stanford University, NAEP, Citizens Research Council, and several Universities.

Conversion schools, introduced a few years back as neighborhood schools, are no more than a reenactment of the site-based management trend U.S. schools went through two decades ago. It did not work then, and there is no research to show that it will work now. In fact research collected at the peak of the site-based management trend showed student performance falling in most of the places where it was tried. This legislation potentially disrupts systems that are working well, because it is not confined to impact schools that are defined as failing in terms of student achievement.

Uncapping Virtual High Schools – well here I'd like to move on to my second point –

**Equity** - As public tax dollars are directed to a variety of unregulated entities (other states, non-profits, for profits, management companies, vendors, etc.) dollars for public education will be so diluted that we will lose much of what we take for granted today. The unintended

consequences of what is being considered will be irreversible for the near future and will put us even further behind our international counterparts.

Uncapping virtual high schools – if this is done with no differentiation on funding, no attention paid to what is actually spent on students, comprehensive high schools as you, your children and your grandchildren know them will be lost.

Even here in Lansing, it is said to be cheaper to run online/ distance learning than on-site/in-person programs. There are some virtual high schools that have been said to cost merely \$3500 per student to operate. One of the best project based online programs, W.A.Y, which we have recently costed out for Oakland County, will run \$6500 per student per year and that is with a mentor for every six students, a teacher leader for every 60 students, giving each student their own computer, and operating 365 days per year – it is not the typical online school we are going to get.

This is why I said we will be giving Michigan tax dollars away.

In Michigan, schools depend on state funding for schools – no taxing authority is given to our school communities for school operation. Since Governor Engler and Proposal A; schools have received a basic per pupil allowance. For our community governed K-12 districts, receiving a single dollar amount for each of their students is appropriate because that number is an average of what they spend, and what they spend is a range of dollars covering programs with a range of costs.

In a comprehensive K-12 district all grades Kindergarten through 12 are operated. In those districts, high schools offer comprehensive programs, both on site and online. They also offer co-curriculars (band, orchestra, choir, drama, etc.), broad and multi-leveled academic offerings (AP, IB, STEM, etc.), and extra-curriculars (football, basketball, swimming, etc.). It is clear that running a comprehensive high school costs much more per student than online high schools.

We also give some money away to charter schools that operate only elementary grade programs – programs that cost less than a comprehensive high school, even if they do offer world language immersion programs.

The question, why would we give our average dollars per student, the average that is spent by community governed districts providing a full range of programs, to those that operate only lower cost formats? Some entities are going to profit nicely from this, while our comprehensive high schools go out of comprehensive business. The point is not whether charters should or should not be, but that charters should not exist to the detriment of community governed public schools. I hope that these empowerment bills

are not designed to further the goals recently published by the American Federation for Children - namely the "defunding of public schools." In your materials is an excerpt from their website, with this statement in their own words.

There is another inequity. Community governed schools serve more special education students and those special students they serve have greater needs than those who attend charter schools. When comparing the special education numbers between charters and community governed schools you have to look at the FTE of the students in special education – the amount of time they require from special educators and special interventions – there is no comparison.

So if community governed schools can serve more costly high school students, in more costly comprehensive high schools, with higher need special education students, it begs the question as to why charter schools and virtual schools would need the same average per pupil funding. Perhaps going to the final point, transparency would give us the answer.

**Transparency** - Our community governed K-12 school districts have accepted and implemented a comprehensive set of rules and regulations about spending public tax dollars and how they are to report that spending. The rules and regulations have brought high levels of fiscal responsibility and transparency. Unfortunately that same level of oversight on the spending of public tax dollars does not apply to every entity who receives those public tax dollars for educating Michigan's children.

Chartered schools and their management companies have never been under the same level of transparency or scrutiny, in fact, management companies, including universities, do not have to disclose their business operations or spending programs – not even with a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request.

Most recently our former and current governors gave K-12 dollars to the community colleges and universities of Michigan – first time since Proposal A became Michigan's public school funding mechanism. Those public funds traveled without any of the fiscal oversight or transparency requirements of community governed public schools.

Lansing has not heard much push back from their community governed school districts on accountability or on transparency. But how is it that none of the language in the "empowerment" bills attaches accountability or transparency to that empowerment? How is that right? More important how is that fiscally responsible to our taxpayers or to our children?

The great American effort called public education is a huge undertaking. We strive for all of our children to achieve at high levels, while other countries settle for just some. As you move forward, please hear more than one voice and take care to do no harm.

